

ANALYSIS

“The Jolly Corner” (1908)

Henry James

(1843-1916)

“The most intimate idea of [“The Jolly Corner”] is that my hero’s adventure there takes the form so to speak of his turning the tables...on a ‘ghost’ or whatever, a visiting or haunting apparition otherwise qualified to appall *him*; and thereby winning a sort of victory by the appearance, and the evidence, that this personage or presence was more overwhelmingly affected by him than he by *it*.”

Henry James
undated entry

The Notebooks of Henry James

F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, eds.
(Oxford 1947)

“The returning New Yorker of ‘The Jolly Corner’ encounters the apparition of himself as he would have been if he had stayed in America: ‘Rigid and conscious, spectral yet human, a man of his own substance and stature waited there it measure himself with his power to dismay’.”

Edmund Wilson
The Triple Thinkers
(Oxford 1938)

“The specter in this tale is typical of Henry James. Unlike the ghosts of other writers, the creatures of James’s imagination represent not the shadows of lives once lived, but the immortal impulses of the un-lived life. In the present story the ghost of Spencer Brydon is obviously his rejected self. Moreover, an injury—the two lost fingers—here stands in some relation to the fact that the life was not lived or that, in other words, a kind of psychological death has occurred. Finally, the injury and the related incompleteness have entailed an unfulfilled love. The hero has fled the heroine because he could not face himself.”

Saul Rosenzweig

“The Ghost of Henry James: A Study in Thematic Apperception”
Journal of Personality XII (December 1943)

“In [“The Jolly Corner,” “The Beast in the Jungle,” and “The Altar of the Dead”] there is a framing of the problem: the desire of the central character to realize total selfhood by discovering or rediscovering the value of the self in some other than its present form. The means by which this is done involves an active communion with another person from whom the self elicits a disguise with which to enact the role of the ideally projected or mysteriously potential other self. The sympathetic person is a woman who, because she helps to identify the other self, becomes identified with it as an heroic substitute-agent. The climax of the action, through which the sought self is encountered, invariably produces a ‘merciful fraud.’ That is to say, either some disguise of the total self or the substitute-agent is sacrificed, released or destroyed, as a less worthy victim in the act of reaching complete consciousness of self. In banal terms: “one always kills the thing one loves,’ i.e., there is no cheaper way of gaining self-knowledge than the necessary tearing to pieces, the dismantling and transfiguration of the self by its idealized or potential image....”

[Brydon] senses that the house on ‘the jolly corner’ represents his deepest consciousness, his refuge from the hint of a gregarious, profitmaking self. But even there, while on its consecrated premises, he is pulled up short by Miss Staverton’s further irony and his own unlooked-for admission. To her statement, ‘But I hope you don’t mean they want you to pull *this* to pieces!’ he answers ‘promptly, with his re-awakened wrath: it was of course exactly what they wanted, and what they were ‘at’ him for daily, with the intention of people who couldn’t for their life understand a man’s liability to decent feelings.’ The decency amounts to his feeling that there are ‘values other than beastly rend-values’ and that ‘there are no reasons

here *but* of dollars. Let us therefore have none whatever—not the ghost of one.’ To Brydon’s dismay, Miss Staverton’s reply unearths the ambiguity of such ‘decency’ and floods his conscience with the real accusation he has been avoiding: ‘Are you very sure it is not they, the building contractors, who want to pull his consciousness to pieces. It is not only the vulgar world outside which is so impervious to ‘A man’s liability to decent feelings’; it is much rather the vulgar world in himself to which he must look either for his own destruction or his own salvation.

How well directed he is he discovers only later when, on the highest floor of his house, where he can stand confident and godlike, feeling he has tracked down the ‘monster,’ he is suddenly challenged by that very monster, that other god-like presence waiting for him. And when he knows the split totality of himself, being at once the thing feared and the thing fearing, the hunter and the hunted both, the hideous certainty presents itself: either one or the other must emerge to be sacrificed. But the ultimate strength in Brydon is Discretion, a courage upheld by reason and taste. To step beyond that, to force the closed door, to challenge but to merge with the characterless presence of his ‘rejected’ self; it is, in fact to walk into madness.... Escaping madness...he turns to descend.... For Brydon it is there below, ‘on the old marble of the hall pavement, large black-and-white squares that he remembered as the admiration of his childhood and that had then made in him, as he now saw, for the growth of an early conception of style.’

Brydon’s *style*, of course, has been precisely the accession of taste and reason, the choice of good and evil. It is here that ‘the black stranger’ (the vision of unrelieved evil for him—because tied up with the curse that environment can inflict—and the vision of defeated, and hence acceptable, evil, for Miss Staverton) uncovers itself as ‘one of those expanding fantastic images projected by the magic lantern of childhood,’ and in this form is irrevocably returned to silence and death. Now it is possible to let the undertakers, the finally subdued world, the contractors, in on the sacrifice.... It is this sacrifice, this ritual death of ‘the black stranger,’ from which he is awakened, lying ‘on his old black-and-white slabs,’ his head on Miss Staverton’s lap, to the joy of complete self-recognition.

The return to childhood (the idyllic scene of the hero’s resurrection) and the sensual identity of the god with his worshipper, the fertile force (Miss Staverton), provide an amazing illustration of one of Frazer’s further observations [in *The Golden Bough*]. ‘On a red-figured vase the god is portrayed as a calf-headed child seated in a woman’s lap.’ No small part of the ritual, the event of Brydon’s ‘rebirth’ depends on the maternal-romantic role of Miss Staverton. For it is she, as the fruitful mother-substitute, who has induced the growth of Brydon’s search through the dark womb of the past, the passages from which he emerges reborn. And it is she, as the prize of love, his lady, to whom he returns with the dragon head of his worldly self dangling from his consciousness.

When he takes his reward in the end by drawing her to his breast, it is only after she had becalmed his jealousy and admitted that ‘the black stranger,’ the slain god (whom she had accepted in her dreams because, as she says, ‘I *could* have liked him,’ as another Brydon), is actually no longer part of Brydon: ‘And he isn’t—no, he isn’t—*you!*’ Only then is the ‘merciful fraud’ consummated: the animal, the beastly self, has been offered as a substitute sacrifice for the human self—the god has eaten of himself so that his cause, his vindicated standards, might flourish.”

Edwin Honig
“The Merciful Fraud in Three Stories by James”
The Tiger’s Eye I, No. 9 (October 1949)

“[James’s] pictorial skills reached one of their summits in ‘The Jolly Corner,’ in his presentation of the interior of his hero’s old house, at his moment of crisis, solely by means of the light that flickers in from the street to heighten the mystery and terror of his ghostly encounter.... [Here] the presence that Spencer Brydon stalks down is James’s means of symbolizing another aspect of the past and present of New York... Once here, [Brydon] begins to speculate on what he might have been if, instead of spending what he knows to be deemed a frivolous idle life, he had stayed at home and gone into business and become ‘one of those types who have been hammered so hard and made so keen by their conditions.’ He gets his answer in his horrified vision of his alter ego, whose mutilated hand drops to reveal his ‘evil, odious, blatant, vulgar’ face, and thus becomes a sign of his crippled spirit.”

F. O. Matthiessen, ed.

The American Novels and Stories of Henry James
(Knopf 1951)

“Brydon’s quest, finally, is...for revelation, and here again the mother-symbol, Alice Staverton, is somehow possessed of the illumination for which Brydon yearns. And the return to the mothers, the symbolized quest for a condition of release and security, promises at once...the evasion of Marcher’s destiny [in “The Beast in the Jungle”], the revelation of Brydon’s hidden hurt, and the transference of the burdens represented by these men. The mothers, fortuitously returned out of the shadowy past, offer the advantages of a ‘general refuge’ to each of our sensitive gentlemen....

Brydon, in his final nocturnal visit to the ‘jolly corner,’ envisions himself in some ‘watery underworld.’ He is, indeed, at ‘the bottom of the sea, which showed an illumination of its own and which he even saw paved...with the marble squares of his childhood.’ Outside, Brydon glimpses the ‘thin admitted dawn, glimmering archwise over the whole outer door.’ And finally and inevitably, he finds himself, after the period of unconsciousness which followed his encounter with his alter ego...cradled in Alice’s lap; she has, he observes, ‘brought me literally to life.... Now [the passionate play which follows] of course, is in some degree the way of a maid with a man; it is also, however, the way of a mother with a babe. And Brydon’s exclamations [“O keep me, keep me!”] seem designedly more infantile than adult.... In...’The Great Good Place’ and ‘The Jolly Corner,’ the progression of quest, return, and rebirth is complete upon both narrative and symbolic levels... We...have three definite examples of the archetypal mother-quest as an integrative symbolic element in the work of Henry James.”

John W. Schroeder
“The Mothers of Henry James”
American Literature XXII (January 1951)

“[This] story...closes on a note of acceptance, an attitude carrying comparatively little conviction after the *tour de force* of [Brydon’s] experiences and their horrifying climax.... In seeking to recall his early memories, at first merely with a pleasurable nostalgia, this Europeanized American gradually undergoes a sense of oppression, which changes into fear when he understands that...instead of the seeker he is now the sought.... In the moment of victory...when the being at last materializes and raises its tormented head from its maimed hands, Brydon has to recognize that the face, though horribly altered and ravaged, is indeed his own.... The maimed hand which the figure draws from its face suggests heaven knows what degree of violence and passion in the hard struggle for easy money.... For ‘The Jolly Corner’ also derives its quality from another of James’s obsessional themes, the violence which lies behind the ‘golden display’ of great possessions.”

Miriam Allott
“Symbol and Image in the Later Work of Henry James”
Essays in Criticism III (July 1953)

“Although one need not accept [Dr. Saul Rosenzweig’s] idea that ‘The Jolly Corner’ is a complement to ‘The Story of a Year’...it is impossible to disagree with the contention that the story deals with an attempt to face the rejected self. That is the surface theme of the story. And James himself could scarcely deny that the story was suggested by his own return to America.

But does it deal with an attempt to ‘rectify the past’? Brydon discovers in himself the presence of an alter ego, a split in personality.... Both Brydons are within the one man....When Brydon tells Alice Staverton that he will never consent to the desecration of the Jolly Corner property, she replies, ‘In short you’re to make so good a thing of your skyscraper that, living in luxury on those ill-gotten gains, you can afford for a while to be sentimental here!’ The compromise thus suggested is proof that Brydon is both the detached and passive observer and the aggressive participant. He is somewhat taken aback by Alice Staverton’s remark, but the story concludes with his reconciliation with his other self.

The love of Alice, demonstrated by her willingness to accept both Brydons, permits him to overcome his horror and to recognize the other self.... The emphasis on sight placed conspicuously in [the] concluding passage is not, I think, accidental. We noted earlier that much is made of vision in James’s stories of artists and detached observers, and if Brydon is a symbolic representation of James himself, the ‘poor ruined

sight' of the other self is a more important injury than the mutilated fingers. But the two go together: the eyes that see, the hand that writes. It had occurred to Brydon on facing a closed door that he could not have closed it because 'it was against his whole policy...the essence of which was to keep vistas clear. He had them from the first, as he was well aware, on the brain,' says Alice Staverton. 'The Jolly Corner' certainly represents a confronting of the rejected self, but it is less an attempt to rectify the past than to justify the present. And Spencer Brydon discovers something that James had known for a long time."

Maurice Beebe
"The Turned Back of Henry James"
The South Atlantic Quarterly LIII (October 1954)

"It is not surprising...that early in 'The Jolly Corner' Brydon reflects that the house which represents home and childhood security 'had, through the successive deaths of his two brothers and the termination of old arrangements, come wholly into his hands.' It follows that this house, the boyhood home where Brydon received the lavish care, warmth, and attention of his loving mother, represents in actuality the mother herself. Houses are commonly feminine symbols in dreams... Brydon's return to the home of his childhood is a return to the womb in fantasy. He has his mother's womb all to himself: the brothers and father have all been killed off. The architectural symbol as it will be seen to function in this story is perhaps one of them most extraordinary examples of symbolic association to be found anywhere in literature."

Robert Rogers
"The Beast in Henry James"
The American Imago XIII (Winter 1956)

"'The Jolly Corner' has been treated as a venture in the supernatural, and an unwitting betrayal of James's own psychic wounds, but it is something much more important than a remnant of uncontrolled experience or a mere fictional device. It is a parable which employs James's 'ideal limits' of moral and aesthetic motion as characters.... We have fallen into James's trap in reading this story as that of a man who discovers what he *would have been*. What Spencer Brydon really discovers is what he *has been*. It is this discovery that enables him to recognize Alice Staverton's love. This is one of James's pretty inversions or equivalences—there is no moral distinction between the greed of the American expatriate and that of the American millionaire....

Spencer Brydon...undergoes what [James's father] had referred to in his own case as 'My Moral Death and Burial.' He confronts the awful creature, 'to advance upon which was the condition for him either of liberation or of supreme defeat.' The man he sees is presented with more 'shade and salience' than any 'portrait' could have given him. Brydon's whole being revolts; he asserts the total *otherness* of the creature in evening dress with his two amputated fingers—and dies to self-hood. (The reader will find this a useful instance of the portrait theme. To accept this presentment as one's self is to be damned; when Alice Staverton encounters this creature in her dream of the same hour, she in effect replaces him. What has become other for Brydon does so at the moment he is prepared to accept Alice Staverton's version of life and reject the one he has so long cherished.) His 'early conception of style' had been nothing less than a love of the images of life for the sake of life itself which had been represented by the persons whose love had filled the house....

At one end of the 'interminable grey passage' thee had stood the other self. Now '*carried back*' from the dark other end of his tunnel,' he finds himself possessed of a wonderful fullness of 'knowledge.' Directly, this is of Alice Staverton's love, an 'inheritance' no less than infinite.... Love has borne Brydon back a third of a century and given him an actual second chance; not a supernatural glimpse of what he might have been, but a chance to become what his inordinately extended 'middle years' had not made him—the inheritor of the house of life, delightedly dependent on fostering love.... [The] protagonist in the story is not an artist, but a dilettante, a redeemed appropriator, who stands, morally speaking, much closer to [the sculptor] William Wetmore Story [the expatriate American whose biography James had recently written] than he does to Henry James, who has so contrived the situation that the real sinner is the expatriate, not the American who might have been."

Quentin Anderson
The American Henry James

(Rutgers U 1957)

“There is in Spencer Brydon a double consciousness, but I cannot agree that it is explained as the selfish and selfless aspects of Brydon’s soul. The ghost, or alter ego, is indeed himself as he might have been if he had remained in New York. Brydon does not see it and has only a vague idea of it; hence he mistakenly supposes the apparition of the entrance hall is the same ghost and it has come from behind the closed door and gone down before him. The ghost prefers the back rooms of the fourth floor because they are most remote from actuality. The apparition, on the contrary, is himself as he actually is; it very properly seems to come from without through the vestibule doors and is seen by the dim light of breaking day. Brydon is puzzled by the apparition because he expects it to be his alter ego and therefore recognizable, yet the face is so horrible that he rejects it with loathing. For thirty-three years he has been false to his true self without realizing it. It is this false self that is revealed to him, as symbolized by the removal of the covering hands, though he does not yet recognize it as his.

Brydon is evidently confused by the working of this double consciousness: the consciousness of his actual self—which is the false self, the mask that he has worn during his European years—and the consciousness of his ghostly self—which is the self that might have been, the self that has been evoked by the strong sense of the past that he feels while in the house. The consciousness of the actual self belongs to the world outside, whereas the consciousness of the self that might have been is inseparable from the old house and is particularly strong in the back rooms of the fourth floor farthest removed from the street. The combat that occurs within Brydon as he starts to mount the stairs on that last night of the story is the struggle between these two consciousnesses.

He has an impulse to flee, which is the consequence of his fear of being lost to actuality and pulled into the ghostly world of his alter ego, but he conquers it for the moment. The reason James does not describe how Brydon gets to the fourth floor is that he wishes us to have the impression that the consciousness of actuality, the false self, remains below and the consciousness of himself as he might have been, the ghostly self, remains at the top. In the interval, the time during which he mounts the stairs, he is in effect without an operative consciousness, since the consciousness of his true self—so long buried under the consciousness of the actual self—has not yet been released. So it seems; yet the consciousness of actuality is never wholly lost, and even the consciousness of his true self, so long buried, has already begun to revive although Brydon does not yet realize what is happening to him. The crisis for him comes when he stands so long, unconscious of time, before the door of the innermost room, and finally abandons forever his pursuit of his alter ego and begs it not to trouble him further.

During the hours of this strange experience, Brydon’s consciousness of his true self is struggling to emerge and has so far succeeded that when at last he does go downstairs the consciousness of actuality seems to rise before him in the apparition as something monstrous. This apparition is not a ghost in the sense that the alter ego on the fourth floor is a ghost. The false self, which he now sees in the apparition, has actually existed, whereas the self that might have been obviously has not except in his imagination. That the apparition belongs to the world without the house is symbolized by the fact that it is seen against the background of the open vestibule doors. The ghost, it will be remembered, remained unseen behind the door of the innermost room of the top floor, and there is no evidence that it comes out at all, though Brydon at first supposes that the apparition and the ghost are the same because he simply cannot otherwise account for what he sees, being still incompletely aware of his false self as false. The closed door above, which is not really closed, and the open doors below, which are not really open, are a part of his hallucinations, but for the reader they are important symbolic keys to James’s meaning.

Brydon does not recognize himself in the apparition with its evening dress, its double eyeglass, its two missing fingers, and its hideous face because it is the confused projection of his double consciousness. The symbols of both consciousnesses appear in the figure and contradict one another. The evening dress could belong to either, but the double eyeglass suggests to him that the apparition is himself as he would have become if he had remained in America. He actually uses a single eyeglass, but Americans prefer the double eyeglass. On the other hand, the missing fingers identify the apparition as himself as he actually is, his physical self. He has been an adventurer, a big-game hunter. If he had remained in New York he probably would not have lost the fingers. Brydon himself is not fully aware, as the reader is, of the workings of his

double consciousness and quite naturally supposes the apparition to be the ghost that he had hoped would remain behind the closed door upstairs. When he sees the face, however, he cannot admit that his could ever have been so horrible. Neither is he ready to admit that it is himself as he actually is, in spite of the missing fingers. Yet when he rejects it, it becomes aggressive. This aggressiveness suggests that Brydon does recognize, after a moment, that the face is his own; that he continues to try to deny it to himself, but is no longer wholly self-deceived by such denial.

Alice Staverton understands him better than he understands himself. She has seen the face of the apparition in a dream at the very moment it appeared to Brydon, and she had also seen it twice before in dreams, recognizing it at once as his false self. Their mutual love (though he has not until then acknowledged it) has produced for them a common psychic experience; indeed it is the power of Alice's love, which is wholly unselfish, that has determined the character of Brydon's strange adventure. It is she who saves him from the ghostly past and later releases his buried self....

He still does not know how he has come to possess knowledge—the knowledge both of his true self and of his false—but he is at peace. He tells Alice that he must have died and she brought him to life again. Alice says...that he has come to himself. She must mean, or James must mean, that Brydon has passed through an experience somewhat like religious conversion that is symbolized by death and resurrection. He has been blind all these years—as the double eyeglass symbolically suggests—to the truth about himself and the love she has been waiting to give him when he should realize his need of it.

When Alice Staverton tells Brydon that he 'came to himself' her words have a double meaning. To Brydon they mean simply that he has recovered consciousness. To the reader they are intended to mean that Alice understands that Brydon has seen himself as he has lived during his European years. The double eyeglass, Alice says, is for his 'poor ruined sight,' clearly symbolic of Brydon's blindness to the true state of things. There are then three 'selves' in the story: the real self that is released by Alice's love, the self that she has believed in throughout; the false self that for thirty-three years has overlaid Brydon's true self and caused him to refuse to acknowledge his love for Alice; and the self that might have been had he never left New York, which is the ghost of the back rooms on the fourth floor of the house on the jolly corner."

Floyd Stovall
"Henry James's 'The Jolly Corner'"
Nineteenth-Century Fiction XII (June 1957)

"The theme of the American's return now replaces his earlier theme of the American pilgrim to Europe. One of these stories reads in fact like a symbolical rendering of James's own return and the revelation it brought him. For the reactions of Spencer Brydon...can be documented almost point by point with James's letters. In the case of the disfigurement of Brydon's American alter ego by the pursuit of 'a million a year' this may not be surprising, but the 'muffled vibrations' with which the Europeanized Brydon responds to the appeal of 'business,' to, have their origin in James's own experience. He too could 'vibrate' momentarily. For his lecture on 'The Lesson of Balzac,' he wrote excitedly to Edmund Grosse, 'Indianapolis offers 100 pounds for 50 minutes!' and to somebody else a few days later, 'a pound a minute—like Patti!' In America even he could make money, and if he preferred nevertheless to 'live a beggar at Lamb House,' at least he wanted his biographer to 'recall the solid sacrifice' involved.

This may be written with tongue in cheek, but no reader of *The Ambassadors* can doubt that James knew well enough how much the 'helpless jelly' of his consciousness had been molded by Europe. In this sense, 'The Jolly Corner' can quite properly be spoken of as autobiographical and the final note of pity for Brydon's disfigured alter ego as an expression of James's own sense that the ravaged businessman is no less a victim of his conditions and therefore no less worthy of sympathy than an Isabel Archer or a Strether. Nevertheless, the man Brydon would have been had he stayed in America is 'grim,' 'worn,' 'ruined,' despite his 'million a year'; he appeals to the lady's sympathy; the man he has become by living in Europe charms her. Her choice is as clear as James's own choice of Lamb House. If the contrast of values remains undefined, it is because the values themselves are neither clearly moral nor clearly intellectual or aesthetic, though all of these somehow hover in the story as possibilities. 'The Jolly Corner' is another example of James's refusal to oppose one cultural value to another, and the most that can be said is that, if the

European Brydon has it over the American, it is because the civilization which formed him has more charm—morally, intellectually, aesthetically in one—than that which might have formed him in America.”

Christof Wegelin
The Image of Europe in Henry James
(Southern Methodist U 1958)

Michael Hollister (2015)